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THE FUTURE IS THE PAST: THE FAILURE OF ACCELERATIONISM

GENERICSCIENCE ACCELERATION, AUTOMATION, BASIC INCOME, COMMUNISM, FEATURED, FUTURE, MARXISM, NICK LAND, WORK

There is a major difference between what is now called 'accelerationism' and its utopian futurist influences from the early 20th century: whether human reason is powerful enough to not only overcome the conditions of capitalism but ultimately the biological limits of humanity itself. "Big-A" Accelerationism, on the other hand, is devoid of human reason as a force of history: capitalism's tendency to uproot and reconfigure ("deterritorialization" in Deleuze-talk) destroys not only Humanity but the concept of agency altogether. The disagreement on human reason makes the similarities between so-called early "accelerationisms" and accelerationism proper almost completely superficial, as these philosophical differences are the difference between communist utopia and cyberpunk hellscape. Where technology allows humankind to transcend its limitations in early "accelerationisms", technology in Landian Accelerationism is an alien force that consumes all of humanity.

Therefore we find it helpful to use a completely different term categorize the early "accelerationisms". We shall instead use the term "Speculative Utopianism" to refer to them, these materialists who nonetheless preserved a utopian imaginary for a future world. One might wince at the term utopian being used positive manner, as the fathers of communism Marx and Engels used the word as an insult to their opponents. But then again, Marx replaced the Hegel's concept of spirit with the agency of the proletariat and brought Hegelian-idealist emancipatory desires into the material realm of class struggle. Here I will use the term 'utopian' to describe people who are not necessarily futurist mystics who reject material reality: but, rather, in the sense of speculative fiction writers who take the social relations and forces of production that already exist in our reality, and seek to build upon them towards a new world. Since the experience of 'actually existing socialism' defines the perception of communism amongst most people (including other supposed communists) it might be necessary to imagine what communism would look like in more detail than Marx and Engels attempted in the Critique of the Gotha Programme. For example, the failure of central planning in the Soviet bloc means that envisioning an alternative system of planning becomes more important in order to make the communist project viable.

THE LEFT ACCELERATIONISM

Some may point out this 'speculative utopianism' sounds similar to something that already exists: left accelerationism. While there

are interesting trends within what is called left accelerationism, there is still a connection to the purely reactionary Landian accelerationism that makes it philosophically incoherent. While they understand that the speed of capitalism is nothing more than illusion at this point in time created by market fetishism, they do not understand that they cannot disconnect this fetish from the core of accelerationism. Capitalism and Technology are inseparable in accelerationism as Nick Land—the main theorist of accelerationism—points out in a quick-and-dirty introduction to accelerationism:

*In 2013, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams sought to resolve this intolerable — even 'schizophrenic' — ambivalence in their 'Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,' which aimed to precipitate a specifically anti-capitalist 'Left-accelerationism,' clearly demarcated over against its abominably pro-capitalist 'Right-accelerationist' shadow. This project — predictably — was more successful at re-animating the accelerationist question than at ideologically purifying it in any sustainable way. It was only by introducing a wholly artificial distinction between capitalism and modernistic technological acceleration that their boundary lines could be drawn at all. The implicit call was for a new Leninism without the NEP (and with the Utopian techno-managerial experiments of Chilean communism drawn upon for illustration)*¹

Nick Land correctly points out in this quote also correctly points out that these "left accelerationists" have more in common with the sort of utopianism inspired the efforts of Chilean attempts at economic planning than accelerationism. This poses the question of why even bother going out of the way to embrace the brand of 'accelerationism' when ultimately these people have barely anything in common with its ultimate goals?

Benjamin Noys refers to accelerationism as a whole as a "post-grad disorder": a sort of ideological Stockholm Syndrome in which post-graduate students rationalize their inability to survive in the marketplace, reimagining it as the beauty of speed eliminating the deadweight of the old world. This is why L/ACC hangs on to Landian philosophy, even though it's detrimental to their overall goals. There's also an issue with the specific demands that are presented in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams that makes them utopians in the worst way. In chapter six of their book *Inventing the Future*, they list out there 4 basic demands which are intended to be "non-reformist reforms":

1. Full automation of production
2. The reduction of the working week
3. The provision of a basic income
4. The diminishment of the work ethic

The major problem is that 3 out of 4 demands cannot really be carried out politically through "non-reformist reforms", as they would have to involve the nationalization of industry in order to be plausible. The old delusions of Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism* reappear, where the current state can gradually be transformed into socialism through reforms. To their credit, they do seem to understand that capitalism is not "speeding" up, but rather going into a state of decay: due to a crisis of profitability, it becomes necessary to demand things that capitalism used to be doing more rapidly, such as automation of production and the reduction of work hours. However, it is not particularly clear how these demands are possible on the scale of national politics, as taking production from the hands of capitalists would require some kind of revolution at the bare minimum. Capitalists, after all, are not going to willing to go along with having production ripped out of their hands peacefully. This not only leaves them philosophically incoherent but politically impotent as well, unable to do anything but clinging on to the left of the Labour Party.

UNCONDITIONAL ACCELERATIONISM

What is referred to as unconditional accelerationism, or "U/ACC" for short, is probably the most faithful to the old tradition of Landian CCRU accelerationism: it follows the anti-humanism of CCRU thought in that it completely denies all human agency (along with the possibility of politics) and fantasizes over the supposed cyberpunk apocalypse that is coming. They refer to this masturbatory practice as anti-praxis.² Despite garnering Praise from Nick Land, the right wing of accelerationist Twitter flames them for their lack of enthusiasm for "Human biodiversity"—basically a revival of pseudoscientific racism. There's also the fact that there were too many trans people involved in U/ACC blogs for the taste of the neoreactionaries.

I wholeheartedly encourage the Folks who run these U/ACC blogs to keep on going, as they seem to send the faux transgressive FOX News grandpas of NRx in fits of anger. Yet, I can not help but laugh at how pathetic this all is. Why would you feel the need to write blog post after blog post about doing nothing in extremely verbose and cryptic language? Do these people understand that capitalism is not "speeding" up but simply decaying? In all honesty, I would love to live in the dystopian hell that they think they're going to live in; it would be cool to have cyber augmentation to balance out the horrific poverty and ecological catastrophe that we are actually facing, instead of just rotting away completely in the mediocrity of capitalism.

This is where the post-grad disorder that U/ACC people suffer from becomes extremely apparent, as the dystopian hell that we are heading towards is not cool or interesting in any way—unless you find people living in Walmart parking lots to be aesthetically pleasing. To engage in the deeper philosophical point in Marx's work, we find the concept of species-being: the essential human process by which humans are altered by their surroundings—nature, social relations, etc.—while at the same time creating those very surroundings. "Men make their own history," he summarizes in the *18th Brumaire*, "but not as they please": while humanity has agency to a certain degree, it is part of the feedback loop that constrains it.

However, Marx believes we gain more control over this loop by collectively acting as a species at greater levels, eventually leading to communism. Marx in *The German Ideology* reflects on the relationship between communism and human agency:

Only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting-off of all natural limitations. The transformation of labour into self-activity corresponds to the transformation of the earlier limited intercourse into the intercourse of individuals as such. With the appropriation of the total productive forces through united individuals, private property comes to an end. Whilst previously in history a particular condition always appeared as accidental, now the isolation of individuals and the particular private gain of each man have themselves become accidental.

Here, one finds communism as a freeing of the individual and mankind as a whole from all the natural limitations of the past, fulfilling the Promethean mission of Hegelian-Marxist philosophy. This all may seem unrealistically optimistic view of human nature and agency, but we can potentially find evidence in relatively recent developments in science that lend credibility. Take epigenetics, as an example: the genetic expression or the way in which genetic traits are turned on and off is determined by environmental factors which means that even if “genetics is destiny” we could have some control over the way genetic traits are expressed. These discoveries are relatively young and we still don’t know what specific environmental factors trigger the turning on and off different traits, but they have already proved valuable in destroying the hard bio determinist conceptions of genetics that had existed before 1990s, and point towards a science that is not merely an ideological product in service of the ruling classes. This points toward the concept of human nature that is found in Marx—species-being—as the human is unique in their ability to heavily alter their environment and therefore nature itself, which in effect alters the nature of humanity itself.

I genuinely do not think the people that push this sort of anti-humanism and fatalist determinism really believe that they lack agency because they behave otherwise. Why go through the trouble of having a blog to tell people that they do not have agency over their own lives? Or that they have no control over the collective destiny of mankind, as though you saying these things would have any effect on these things or the people? You can basically just respond to U/ACC or any kind of hard determinism by pointing out that they are essentially wasting their time if they actually believed anything that they were saying.

I mean it sort of makes sense—if you are post-grad who wasted their rich parents’ money on a media studies degree, you might as well do something with all that time you spent pretending to read *Anti-Oedipus*. At least you can get 2000 or so followers on Twitter who think your word salads are genius pieces of theory. When all is said and done in the end, perhaps you have children abandoned to the future wasteland, and they may turn to ask “what did you do while the earth was being killed”? The Unconditional Accelerationists can only mumble some shit about their WordPress blog, and how they urged people to do nothing, but that they had a number of followers for it.

RIGHT ACCELERATIONISM

Now we turn to the old master: Nick Land. The man and the “think tank” that he was tied to—the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU)—became the thing of legends. This reputation has been earned to a certain degree by the entertainment value that comes from reading the writings of—and the stories about—drugged out academic nihilists. What’s more entertaining than a young professor lying on the ground screaming incessantly to jungle music as his students stare in sheer bewilderment? These people were the hippies of a decade where peace and love were out and the sunken-in embrace of cyberpunk dystopia was in. Like the tragic hippies of the 1960s and 70s, no amount of “radical” claims or dropping acid could prevent all these farcical overeducated Gen-Xers from collapsing into resentful conservatives. Land does not like admitting it this fact, even though deep down he knows it is true. That’s why he latched onto framing his slide into the Paleolibertarianism and Hoppean Neo-Monarchism as “Neo-Reaction” or “The Dark Enlightenment”, as rebelling against the low-key Christianity of “The Cathedral”. “The Cathedral” is a slightly more complex version of the “cultural Marxism” conspiracy theory that *still* sees reds under the bed of every NGO, union, party, and think-tank. The purpose of the Cathedral is to promote the myth of democracy, that all humans are equals. Even then, this concept of “The Cathedral” ignores inconvenient facts that get in the way of this narrative: the existence of “The Cathedral” rests on a vision of Democracy in that is run by the principles of neoliberal political science like public-choice theory—the idea that increased democratic rights expand the power of interest groups, increase the size of the government, and negatively affect society as a whole. Land, ever the speculative spinmaster, gives an apocalyptic variation on this theme: untrammelled democracy will lead to the breakdown in society, a “tyranny of the majority”. Nick Land refers to this phenomenon as the “zombie apocalypse” in his insufferably overwrought polemic *The Dark Enlightenment*.

However is there much evidence for the claim that “democracy” has led to the expansion of government? Perhaps the one consistent thing about Nick Land is that he still seems to be allergic to is citing any kind of empirical data to back up his claims. This was sort was forgivable in his youth when he was writing *Shadowrun* copypastas that were intended to be “Theory Fiction”, but it starts to become laughable when he tries to do anything outside the realm of bad sci-fi—the “zombie apocalypse” being a specific case of this sort of nonsense. Land is clutching his pearls about “the zombies” using the state to take away the wealth of capitalists while 45% of the adults in the US do not (or cannot) vote!³ Particularly those Land singles out as the worst offenders of Zombism—black people and immigrants—are part of a larger trend of dissatisfaction with representative democracy and political nonparticipation that is being referred to as “Anti-Politics” by a number of political commentators.⁴⁵ Anti-political trends are also

coupled with the slow demolishing of the welfare state across the western world. Why would “Cathedral” figureheads like Bill Clinton destroy the means of them securing votes from the zombies by pushing for welfare reform in the 90s? What if there’s a special interest group that holds way more power in the Cathedral than everyone else? This interest group would be the capitalist class: the people who fund the campaigns, the think tanks, the activist NGOs, and both of the parties to the point where their interests almost completely override popular opinion or any other interest group when it comes to policy.⁶

With that we have destroyed “The Cathedral”, accomplishing more than Nick Land, Moldbug or anyone in their corner blogosphere will in their entire lives. Now that we’ve shown Nick that “The Cathedral” was not in his closet or under his bed, we can go back to addressing why they would need to create such a bogeyman to rebel against in the first place. Nick Land’s enemy isn’t The Cathedral—his enemy is the emancipatory commitments of his youth. The bitterness of this break becomes incredibly apparent in an interview that he did with Marko Bauer and Andrej Tomažin titled “The Only Thing I Would Impose is Fragmentation”; after a few banal softball questions, he gets this blazing 90 MPH pitch of a question:

Interviewer: There seems to be a lot of engagements with contrarianism and Poe’s Law. Via @Outsideness you wrote: “Actually I like plenty of immigrants and black people, just not the grievance-mongers, rioters, street-criminals, and Jihadists that the Cathedral preaches incessantly in favor of.” Don’t you here sound a bit like Borges (of the Tlon Corporation) advocating ‘liberty and order’ while supporting Pinochet, preserving or reestablishing the Human Security System? Isn’t all of this a far cry from:

Meltdown has a place for you as a schizophrenic HIV+ transsexual chinese-latino stim-addicted LA hooker with implanted mirrorshades and a bad attitude. Blitzed on a polydrug mix of K-nova, synthetic serotonin, and female orgasm analogs, you have just iced three Turing cops with a highly cinematic 9mm automatic

Nick Land: [Long silence.] Let me see what is the best way to answer. [Long silence.] I don’t know, it’s difficult. I’ve got a whole ankle-biting fraternity on Twitter now. I am not identifying you with them, let me make that clear from the start, but I think that their question is very much like yours. One element of it is age. Youngsters are highly tolerant of massive incendiary social chaos. There are reasons for that, the best music comes out of it. It’s not that I am not understanding that, the whole appeal of cyberpunk is based on this. But I just don’t think you can make an ideology purely out of entropic social collapse, it’s not gonna fit together. It is not a sustainable, practically consistent process and, therefore, it’s a bad flag for acceleration. It produces a reaction that will win. All historical evidence seems to be that the party of chaos is suppressed by the party of order. Even if you’re completely unsympathetic with the party of order, and I am not pretending to be anything quite so unambiguous, it’s not something that you want to see. Nixon put down hippies, the Thermidor put down the craziness of the French revolution. It’s an absolutely relentless and inevitable historical story that the party of chaos is not going to be allowed to run the process and will be suppressed. There’s obviously various types of aesthetic and libidinal attractions to it, but in terms of programmatic practicality there is nothing. What I would say to these crazy youngsters now is, you don’t have a programme. What you’re advocating leads perversely to the exact opposite of what you say you want.

I cannot express enough how beautiful this moment is from the long awkward silence to the begrudging (half) tongue-in-cheek bemoaning of youngsters and their desire for chaos. At that moment it should be clear to every Nick Land fanboy that their king of transgression was nothing more than a Fox News-watching sexagenarian who clings onto the cyberpunk aesthetic as *part of his brand* more than anything else. But the follow up makes it even better:

Interviewer: You sound a bit like a Left accelerationist right now with all this talk of having a programme and ideology.

Land: Yes, there is that problem, but you always have a practical orientation. NRx has a programme, even in its most libertarian form. It’s not a programme that is going to be implemented by a bureaucratic apparatus in a centralized regime, but it’s an attempt to have some consistency in your pattern of interventions. Of course, everyone is trying to do that. Even the chaos fraternity, in so far as they want to be the chaos fraternity when they wake up the next day, have a programme in this minimal sense. And that sense, I think, is the only sense I would strongly hold onto here. A strategy.

And with that, Nick Land utterly destroyed any claim to the coherence of “right accelerationism” without even comprehending what he just did: his admissions undermine the spiritual continuity between the chaotic nihilism of his youth and his poorly-masked, tepid conservatism. The Nick Land of the present day is a man who thinks of himself more aligned with Nixon than the crazy youths, who simply wants to create a nice gated free-market utopia away from the rainbow coalition of cybernetic queer brown zombies that he used to get high with. Nick Land is no more of an “accelerationist” than the left accelerationists that he mocks for wanting to imitate Project Cybersyn; he also wants to imitate a Chilean utopian program, just that of Pinochet rather than Allende.

But let us not pretend that this development came out of nowhere. Much like hippies of the 60s slowly turning into conservatives over time, the seeds of their conservatism was always there from the beginning in their superficial rebelliousness. Nick Land talked of death, destruction, and nihilism along with the rest of CCRU cult, but they were merely riding the wave of neoliberal market fetishism by proxy—the myth of creative destruction translated into Deleuzian word salads. It was a straight line from Nick Land’s bad reading of Deleuze and Guattari to Schumpeter and Hans-Hermann Hoppe.

THE SOCIAL BASIS FOR ACCELERATIONISM

We must ask ourselves if Accelerationism is a hollow ideology, then what is its appeal? Why would mainstream publications such as *The New Statesman*⁷ and *The Guardian*⁸ be writing articles about an obscure dogma composed of the blog droppings of post-grad dorks and professional pseudo-intellectuals?

The answer becomes clear as we look at the history of the political left leading up to this point. What spurred the CCRU into existence was the then-recent collapse of the Soviet Union, in tandem with the slow decline of the social democratic left and the introduction of Deng's reforms in China. The only thing that seemed—and continues to seem—possible was to ride the waves of the free-market, hoping to god that this process would be destructive enough to destroy everything this mediocre world.

The Capitalist Stockholm Syndrome still lives on today in light of the failures of SYRIZA to revive the social democratic tradition of the left, but neither the social democrats nor the Accelerationists realize that their pet ideologies will not bring about their desired outcomes. There will be no social democratic revival that will end up being successful because the power of international capital will overwhelm any attempt to institute these reforms on a national level. This is the lesson they should have learned when SYRIZA was forced to implement austerity measures, betraying whatever social democratic values that they had, in order to appease the EU backing 2015.⁹ Or, hell, they should have learned back in the 80s when the socialist government of France suffered horrific capital flight that tanked their economy in response to them implementing relatively modest reforms.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Accelerationists should actually take a moment to look at the slowdown in technological innovations that have happened in relation to the implementation of free-market policies¹¹, since at the bare minimum L/ACC people have seemed to notice this decline. Instead of falling back with the tide of capitalist restructuring, this social democratic ideology of a certain form has mangled itself into something new: they ride the waves of the free market into a new kind of social democracy, one built around immiseration rather than enrichment.

THE NIHILISTIC UTOPIA AND THE FUTURE BEYOND IT

It becomes clear reflecting upon the whole of Accelerationism, from the CCRU onwards, that it was on a fundamental level a utopian project of sorts: a utopian project for those who could not believe utopias anymore, who could only see the future as a process of destruction of humanity. The only thing that these young post-grads could possibly envision in the depths of the 90s was a cyberpunk selection process where the weight of poverty and ecological catastrophe would eliminate the weak humanism of past, finally completing a Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean mission of crushing the remnants of Christianity within secular culture. They welcomed this future with open arms wherever they saw it, whether it was early hacker culture or science fiction films, and especially so when all these things became cultural artifacts of the 90s. Instead of reveling in the past in order to find a future that was worth living in, these post grad hacks are nostalgic for a catastrophe-ridden hellscape that never came. They will never get to enjoy the mass cyberdeath extravaganza that *Terminator* and "Meltdown" promised them. We are not seeing the *Blade Runner* future when we look at Rust Belt towns, just empty desolation but for the few wandering ghosts of alcoholics and opioid addicts struggling to remain in this plane of existence. It is a world of slow and painful decay. If we are going to turn to the past to realize the future, we might as well turn to a time in which humanity sought out to create utopias that were worth living in, where speculative fiction had higher aspirations than showing the ugliest face of man.

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